

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

LECH LECHA

8 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Eight questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture "Lech Lecha: The Third Attempt": after Adam and Noach, Avram, the one who gives himself without expecting anything; a great nation promised in order to restore to the nations the notion of family; and our origins as Hebrews, from Terach's bookshop to the halt at Haran.



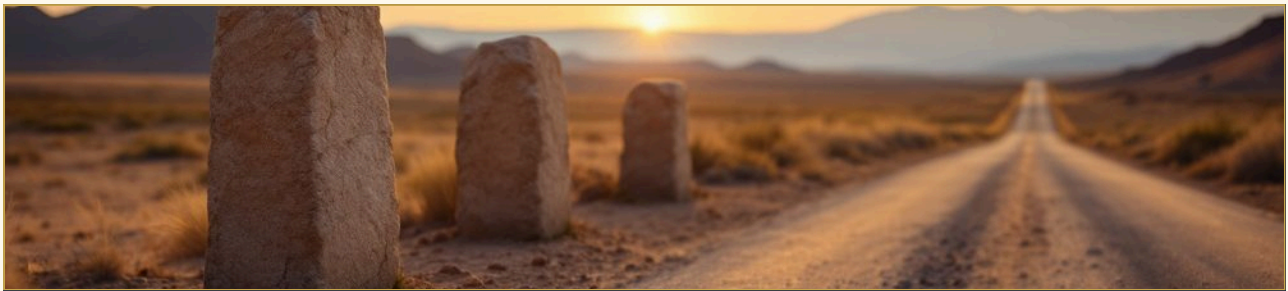
Rav Raphaël Benizri

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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the Lech Lecha table

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Three Attempts



PRESENTATION

For the Rav, Lech Lecha is the third attempt to set the history of humanity in motion. There were two before: that of Adam, then that of Noach, each ending after ten generations.

THE QUESTION

What did Adam and Noach lack — and what does Avram bring that is new?

THE ANSWER

“For Your salvation I hope, O L-rd” (Bereshit 49:18).

This three-word verse, which we repeat almost every day, can be read in three ways. The first is Adam's: in an Eden-like world, he has everything and has nothing to do; he is the righteous man who lacks nothing, yet who would like to attempt his own formation himself and does not want unconditional service. He fails, and goes to serve his apprenticeship outside the garden. G-d's regret means only that this attempt did not work: one does not reach closeness to G-d without having acquired it by oneself.

The second is Noach's: he wants to invest himself totally with G-d in bringing the world to fulfilment, but for this he asks for His help; it is the first covenant between G-d and man. The third is Avram's: everything I undertake is for Your name, I expect nothing, I want nothing for myself, my investment is entirely free. With him, G-d makes a covenant without limit in either space or time.

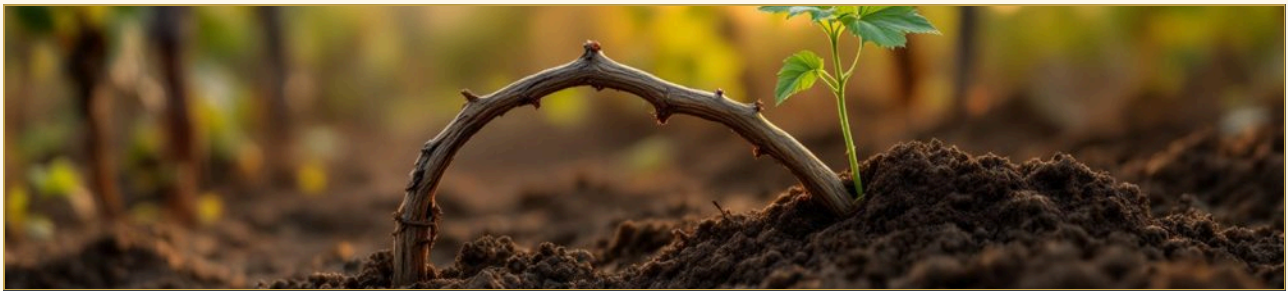
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We cannot reach this intense spirituality of closeness to G-d without personal effort, without having acquired it by ourselves.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Receiving everything, asking for help, or giving without expecting anything: in which of these three attitudes does each of us recognise himself today? And in what area could we try the third?

The Sand, the Stars and the Buried Branch



PRESENTATION

The descendants promised to Avram will be like the sand of the earth and like the stars of the sky; and the promise is phrased in terms of blessing. We usually hear in it a matter of numbers. The Rav hears it differently.

THE QUESTION

What does the promise of sand and stars measure, if not numbers — and what does “you will be a blessing” mean?

THE ANSWER

“Look at the sky and count the stars [...] so shall your descendants be” (Bereshit 15:5); “be a blessing” (Bereshit 12:2).

It is not only that they cannot be counted. It is not a quantitative assessment of Avram's descendants: it is a spiritual estimate. It is the potential of light the Jewish people could bring to the whole universe, through a spirit of self-sacrifice, a spirit of devotion to the cause of humanity.

And the word for blessing, *berachah*, also has the sense of layering: a branch buried in the soil, which disappears and gives life to another tree. So are the generations of Israel, says the Rav — and so will all the families of the earth be, blessed through him.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is not a quantitative assessment of Avraham's descendants, but a spiritual estimate.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

If our family were measured not by numbers but by light, what would we count? Let each person name a “branch” of the family that took root elsewhere and gave new life around it.

SUBJECT 03

A Great Nation — but Blessed Families



PRESENTATION

The promise rests on two words that do not say the same thing. G-d says: I will make you a great goy, a nation. And He concludes: all the mishpachot, all the families of the earth, will be blessed through you.

THE QUESTION

Why promise a nation yet bless families — what does the one lack that the other has?

THE ANSWER

“I will make you a great nation” (Bereshit 12:2); “through you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Bereshit 12:3); “by their families, by their tongues, in their lands, by their nations” (Bereshit 10:31).

The text of the generations of Noach distinguishes the two. The mishpachah cultivates a lashon, an inner language, a language of intimacy. When a family is formed and develops well, it has no need to mark out its borders: exchanges between families join the borders together, and people live in a shared space. But when the family fails, the threat of the goy appears. The goy is defined by its territory: one appeals to the nation, the homeland, a narrow nationalism. It is no longer lashon, it is safah, the lip: an outer language, political, of mere good relations, nothing more — the language of Babel.

Avram must therefore become a great nation — one must set oneself apart, like Noach in his ark — but with a view to restoring to the nations the notion of family. How does one pass from the lip to the inner language? Each person has within him this breath of speech; but, like the Tablets of the Law, it has been shattered, and each keeps only a fragment. This language will recover its unity only through communication between the families of the earth.

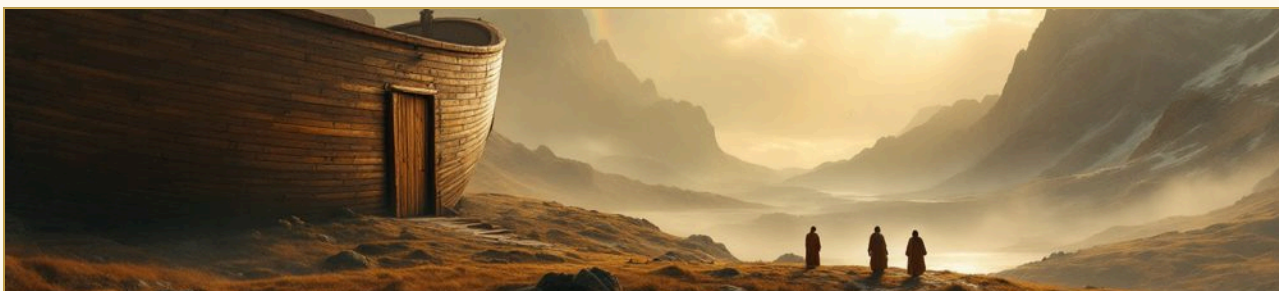
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

To become the great nation — but to what end? To restore to the nations the notion of family.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We readily speak the language of the lips, even at home: politeness, organization, news. When did we last speak the inner language to someone in this house? And to which family, outside our own, have we brought something this year?

The Ark and the Three Sons



PRESENTATION

With Adam, outside the garden, we do not yet see a family formed: only children who live out their time and disappear. The notion of family, says the Rav, takes shape with Noach — and Noach has three very different sons.

THE QUESTION

What gives birth to the family — and why should Noach have held his three sons together?

THE ANSWER

“Come, you and all your household, into the ark” (Bereshit 7:1); “may G-d enlarge Yefet, and may he dwell in the tents of Shem” (Bereshit 9:27).

With Adam, once left to his personal experience, everything is a rough draft; there are a few stars in those generations, but they do not adapt to the development of their society. The family takes shape with Noach, in his ark, in his house. It is the family that must be cultivated first if one does not want to be swept away by the flood that threatens a humanity left to itself: one must know how to close the doors of one's house and begin to build one's family, with a spiritual aspiration and a sense of humility.

But Shem embodies ethics, Cham economics, Yefet art, and Noach separated them; they should have been embraced in a single line of generation. One cannot live from Shem alone while remaining dependent on Cham, nor opt for Yefet, who seeks to penetrate the inside from the outside, while we seek to shape the outside according to our inner sensitivity. Noach understood this in the end: from a righteous, whole man he became “the man of the earth”; and in his blessing he joins Yefet's art to the tents of Shem.

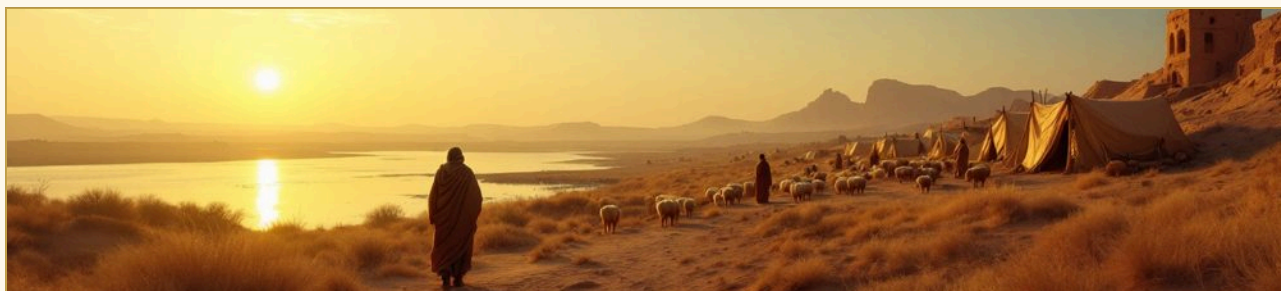
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

One must first know how to close the doors of one's house and really begin to build one's family.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Ethics, work, beauty: in our home, which of Noach's three sons takes up all the room, and which is forgotten? How can we bring them together around the table this week?

Where Does This Man Come From?



PRESENTATION

Before following Avram, the Rav asks a question: where do we come from, who are we? We are the Hebrews, that is, the descendants of Ever.

THE QUESTION

What does the name “Hebrews” teach us about our origins — and why did Ever call his son Peleg?

THE ANSWER

“Shem, father of all the children of Ever” (Bereshit 10:21); “the name of one was Peleg, for in his days the earth was divided” (Bereshit 10:25).

Ever is a descendant of Shem, and he names one of his sons Peleg, from a verb meaning to divide: it is the division of Babel, where people no longer understand one another, so absorbed are they in a civilisation of technical discoveries that they no longer have time to ask about the meaning of their lives. How did Ever know what was going to happen? He was a prophet: he foresaw the splitting of humanity into seventy nations, each taking a fragment of the dislocated Adam.

The Rav links the Hebrews to the “Habiru” tribes of which history keeps a trace, scattered among the peoples because no one could bear them: no one wants a concentration of thought that weighs on politics. A king of the region even complains in writing of the trouble they cause: they refuse to return a runaway slave to his masters; on the contrary, they give him asylum, protect him, cover for him. Those are our origins: we are the people from the other bank.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

They are beings eager for freedom, for spirituality, who become the defenders of an ideal of life for man.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Being “from the other bank” means accepting not to think like everyone else. On what question does our family stand “on the other side”? And to whom do we, too, give asylum?

Terach's Bookshop



PRESENTATION

Terach, Avram's father, kept an idol shop. The Rav asks a simple question: what would an idol shop be today?

THE QUESTION

What did Terach sell — and what should we do with philosophies and ideologies, however sublime?

THE ANSWER

Our Sages: “believe that there is wisdom among the nations; do not believe that there is Torah among the nations”.

It would be a shop of philosophy books of every tendency. Every government, every conviction has its deity, its way of conceiving life and history, and people are ready to sacrifice their lives for the success of their ideology. Terach was open to all these philosophies and he sold them — until the day Avram wages war on them, breaks them and shows their emptiness.

The Rav was asked the meaning of the saying “from Moshe to Moshe, none arose like Moshe”. His answer: this Moshe embraced all philosophical orientations, all sublime ideals; he stripped them of their peel, of what made them a foreign worship, and gave them a single code. So it is with currents of thought: as long as they have not been brought back to unity, they remain liable to be idolatry. And the philosopher is not the embodiment of his own philosophy; the Torah, however, demands that one be consistent with oneself and realise the whole within oneself.

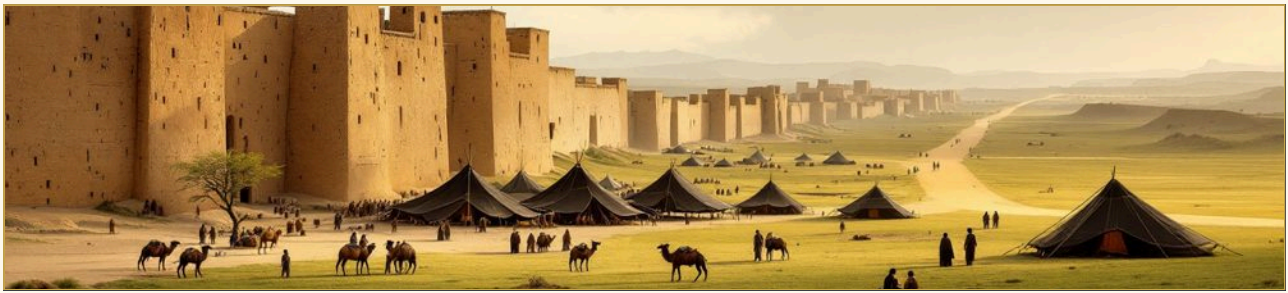
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

As long as they have not been brought back to unity, they are liable to be a foreign worship.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Our modern “bookshops” — social networks, newspapers, series — sell many philosophies. Which one won us over this year? What would we keep of it once stripped of its peel?

Stopping at Haran



PRESENTATION

Terach leaves Ur Kasdim with his family to go to Canaan, but he stops at Haran. His son Nachor settles there. The Rav reads these halts as two ways of living in exile.

THE QUESTION

Why does Terach stop at Haran — and what temptation does Nachor's choice represent?

THE ANSWER

“They went out together from Ur Kasdim to go to the land of Canaan; they came as far as Haran and settled there” (Bereshit 11:31).

Avram is a survivor of the persecutions of Nimrod, the champion of secularism at any price, who wanted to dethrone the Divine and prove that society can organise itself on its own. The house of Terach is forced into exile, and they think of returning to Canaan, the land that fell to Shem in the division, since invaded by the descendants of Cham: a little like a secular Zionist undertaking this return because he is fleeing pogroms. But Terach does not reach the end: he stops at Haran, somewhere in present-day Turkey.

Nachor finds there a more tolerant land, room for a life of compromise with the Arameans. Rather than return to the land of Shem, one settles for living outside and spreading this ideal through cosmopolitanism among the nations — an attempt, says the Rav, made many times over in history. Later, Avraham will seek a wife for Yitzchak from his family, but on condition that she come to the land of Israel.

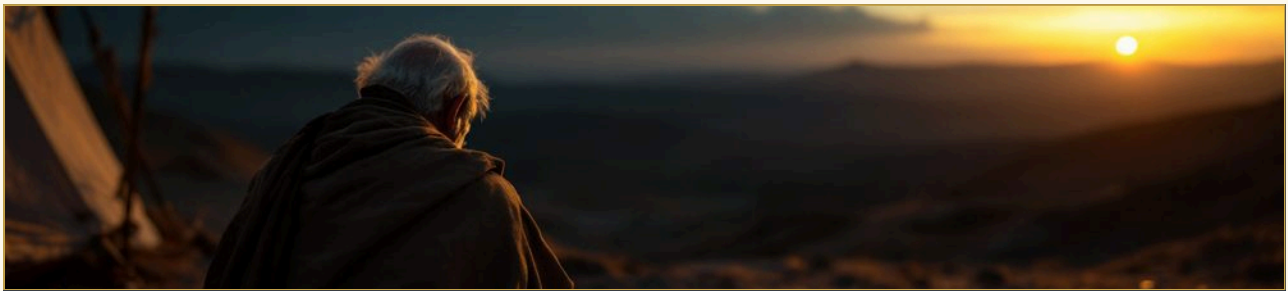
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Rather than think of returning to the original land of Shem, one will settle for living in Haran.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all have our “Harans”: comfortable halts on the road to what we wanted. Where did our family stop along the way? Was it wisdom, or only comfort?

First Listen, Then See



PRESENTATION

It is at Haran that Avram receives the order to leave. Until now, says the Rav, there had only been talk of prophets. He pauses over the way the order is worded, and over what it leaves unsaid.

THE QUESTION

Why is the order to leave given at Haran — and why is the land not yet named?

THE ANSWER

“The L-rd said to Avram: go for yourself” (Bereshit 12:1).

We must not lay ourselves open to a country that would gladly welcome us, provided we do not bother it with our way of thinking, our ideology, our faith. G-d says to Avram: do not stay in the middle of the road; go and look for your roots elsewhere. The prophet, says the Rav, is the man in search of his furthest point of communication with the absolute; he feels it so intensely that he is driven to leave the milieu in which he lives.

“To the land that I will show you”: first you will listen, then you will see. The progression runs from hearing to vision. And for now, the project must not be revealed: one does not unveil the project of a Jewish state in a country occupied by the Canaanites. One must first settle, lay the foundations of a family, and gradually bring about the flourishing of a people descended from Avraham.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

One must first settle; one must lay the foundations of a family.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Some projects are spoiled by being announced too early. Which family project would gain from being lived first, before being proclaimed? Are we in the time for listening, or already in the time for seeing?